



Press Freedom



OVERVIEW

Across the world, the issue of freedom of the press is one that policymakers address daily. Whether it is in the United States, Zimbabwe, or Afghanistan, reporters face threats ranging from lawsuits to expulsion from the country, to threats of death or physical harm. This issue is important because without a free press, the citizens of a country can go uninformed about government and business actions that are detrimental to their well being. In the United States, for example, the role of the media in holding those in power accountable for their actions has led to it being called the “fourth branch” of American democracy. Expressing one’s thoughts and complaints without fear of repercussions is a freedom that not all people around the world enjoy.

HISTORY

The history of reporting is filled with journalists who have suffered at the hands of governments for reporting the truth or speaking their opinion. In ancient China, many people were severely punished or even put to death for speaking out against the Emperor. In England, it was not until John Milton’s *Areopagitica* was published in 1644 that the notion of a free press began to take hold. Even in the United States, where the right to freedom of speech was enshrined in the First Amendment of the Bill of Rights, sometimes the freedom of the press is restricted. Even in some developed countries, like Australia, there is



no specific mention of press freedom in their Constitution. Additionally, in many countries laws against “insulting” public officials are used to threaten journalists.¹

The level of press freedom is an important factor in determining the overall level of freedom and quality of human rights in a country. When looking to stop human rights abuses it is the repression of media that is the first warning signal of deeper problems. In developing or non-democratic countries, a free press is especially important in building an informed public response to problems such as corruption, conflict, and oppression. A strong and vocal public leads to stable and long-term democracies and to healthy social, political and economic development. According to Freedom House, only 21 percent of the world's people live in countries with a fully free press.

Not only is press freedom important to the citizens of countries under repressive or corrupt regimes, but it is also important for people outside of these countries to understand what is occurring within its borders. Businesses, activists, and travelers want and need to know what is going on in other countries. If reporters are corrupt or prevented from investigating their stories it puts all people at a disadvantage. For example, the restrictions put on bloggers and reporters in China severely limits an American's ability to get honest information about the country as well as limiting the ability of Chinese people to freely communicate concerns about government policies.

PROBLEMS

Endangerment

In the four years of the Iraq war, 153 journalists have died there.² Admittedly, the work of journalists in many countries can be dangerous. Journalists are often not specifically targeted by rebel groups or governments because to do so would anger other journalists, creating bad press for the group or government. Unfortunately, harassment of reporters has been a common element of repressive governments and groups in history and continues to manifest itself today. In Iraq and Afghanistan, reporters continue to be abducted by terrorists for ransom or death. The most notable incident



occurred not long after the US invasion of Afghanistan when Wall Street Journal reporter Daniel Perl was kidnapped and beheaded in Pakistan³. While not a country, ISIS is a serious threat to freedom of the press and has publically executed journalists from several nations, including James Foley of the United States.

Many governments physically threatening reporters as well. In Zimbabwe, independent media organizations have been shut down and reporters arrested and beaten, both for reporting the truth about the state of affairs in that country and for criticizing the government.

¹ InfoPlease. “Freedom of the Press” (<http://www.infoplease.com/encyclopedia/history/press-freedom-the-history.html>)

² Huffington Post, “Record Number Of Journalists Killed During Iraq War: Committee To Protect Journalists” (http://www.huffingtonpost.com/2013/03/19/iraq-war-killed-journalists_n_2907550.html)

³ The Wall Street Journal. “Reporter Daniel Pearl Is Dead, Killed by His Captors in Pakistan” (<http://www.wsj.com/articles/SB1014311357552611480>)



GOVERNMENT REPRESSION OF JOURNALISTS: ZIMBABWE

In the last five years, Zimbabwe's government has enacted laws that give it control over who may operate a media outlet and practice journalism, as well as broad powers to prosecute persons critical of the government.

The Broadcasting Services Act of 2001 reinforced the state's monopoly over all electronic broadcasting. The law gives the Minister of State for Information and Publicity the authority to determine who gets a broadcasting license and under what circumstances, to tighten restrictions on the nature, quality and quantity of information broadcast through radio and television, and to ban broadcasters who are deemed to be a threat to national security.⁴

Censorship

Censorship of the press is also common in many countries. It may come in two forms: self-imposed and state-imposed. Ultimately, most physical threats made to reporters are intended to make them self-censor their reporting activities out of fear of retaliation. Reporters who know they will go to jail if they criticize the government or its policies are much less likely to report on it at all. Similarly, reporters in dangerous zones around the world, from Columbia to Iraq to Somalia, also are pressured by non-governmental actors such as rebel groups, terrorists, and criminals.^{5 6}

In addition to attempting to control the press through creating a climate of fear and self-censorship, governments around the world rely on institutionalized censorship. China is perhaps the country most known by Americans to engage in such practices, but it is hardly alone. In the United States, censorship has been most likely to occur during wartime. In World War II, President Roosevelt created the Office of Censorship which read every letter entering and leaving the United States from 1941 until 1945, and was also given the power to censor any reporting at the order of the Director of the Office of Censorship. In 1971, during the waning years of the Vietnam War, the New York Times wanted to publish a secret Department of Defense report on the war. The government tried to stop them from publishing the story by taking the paper to court, but eventually lost.

While both taking a media organization to court or shutting it down are common methods of censorship, still more common is government censorship of particular words, images, or websites. In the People's Republic of China, the government controls Internet access and employs what has become known as "The Great Firewall of China" to block its citizens from viewing foreign websites that deal with democracy, human rights, news critical of China, and other topics. It does so by a variety of technical methods and with the cooperation of search engines such as Yahoo! and Google, who both work with the government to censor websites in exchange for access to the Chinese Internet market.

⁴ Human Rights Watch. "Zimbabwe: Crackdown on the Press Intensifies."
(<http://hrw.org/english/docs/2006/02/08/zimbab12632.htm>)

⁵ Wilke, Jürgen. "Censorship and Freedom of the Press." (<http://ieg-ego.eu/en/threads/european-media/censorship-and-freedom-of-the-press>)

⁶ "Censorship, Violence and Press Freedom." Article 19. (<https://www.article19.org/pages/en/censorship-violence-press-freedom-more.html>)



SELF-CENSORSHIP: COLUMBIA

Carlos Lauria, Americas program director at the Committee for the Protection of Journalists says, despite recent improvements, Colombia still remains one of the most hostile countries in the Americas for the press."

Last April, in response to a spate of threats against journalists in Barrancabermeja, a delegation of local and international press freedom organizations visited the city on a fact-finding mission. They concluded that "reporters lived in a climate of intimidation that inhibits the freedom of press." Journalists were increasingly relying on official government press releases as their only source, they said, and more alarmingly, are practicing self-censorship as a form of protection.

"The decrease in attacks against journalists reflects a custom of self-censorship, especially in the country's interior," explains Lauria.

But few journalists are willing to go on the record about the practice of self-censorship, and the issue has become taboo among journalists. One senior reporter at the RCN news channel, who preferred to remain anonymous, said, "I have to think carefully before reporting about sensitive issues. Self-censorship has become a conscious and subconscious part of everyday culture for most television news journalists, especially among those covering the conflict." ⁷

CENSORSHIP OF THE INTERNET IN CHINA

Experts say the Chinese government deploys at least twelve agencies to enforce a wide array of Internet regulations directed at service and content providers. The effort includes the policing of cyber cafés, as well as government-run computers that constantly monitor for banned content. The government requires Internet service providers to obtain a license from the Ministry of Information Industry and maintain a complete record of customer usage for sixty days, to be surrendered upon government request. Last year, the government shut down thousands of web sites that had not been registered.

China's Ministry of Public Security reportedly employs tens of thousands of human monitors to screen Internet content. The ministry has also established a system of online reporting centers that encourage citizens to report "harmful" information ranging from sites displaying pornography to banned political activities. Forbidden items include sites giving information on the Falun Gong spiritual movement or the 1989 Tiananmen Square crackdown. Banned sources include the websites of Radio Free Asia, the BBC's Chinese-language service, and the online public encyclopedia, Wikipedia. A watchdog organization comprising three academic institutions, the OpenNet Initiative, calls China's filtering system "pervasive, sophisticated, and effective."⁸

⁷ Global Journalist. "Self-Censorship as Self-Defense." (http://www.globaljournalist.org/magazine/2005-3/self_censorship.html)

⁸ Council on Foreign Relations. "U.S. Internet Providers and the 'Great Firewall of China'" (http://www.cfr.org/publication/9856/us_internet_providers_and_the_great_firewall_of_china.html)



Corruption

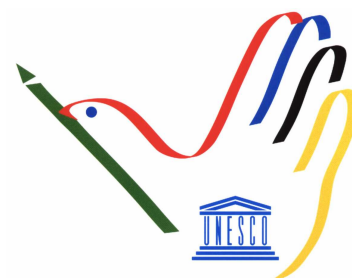
The press freedom can also be undermined from within by corrupt reporters. In countries across the world, some reporters promote propaganda and take money to report on particular stories. Instances of reporters lying and making up facts undermined the public's trust in the press. Although a country may have a free press, if its reporters are corrupted then the country's citizens are still not being served. In some countries the government or a government party owns some or all of the media outlets. This is particularly problematic because they can control how the people view the government or party by only releasing positive stories. For example, former Prime Minister of Italy, Silvio Berlusconi, owned 3 of the 7 national television channels and his brother owned a prominent newspaper which was accused of wiretapping in 2005.⁹

In China, the wide corruption of the press recently came to international attention when a reporter was beaten to death by an illegal coal mine owner. The reporter was trying to get the man to pay him so that he would not write a news story about the mine. Reporters in China since 1979 have been receiving less and less government money as pay, and as a result often turn to corruption in order to make a living. Companies seeking to advertise in Chinese newspapers and magazines are often forced to bribe their way into print.¹⁰

The greater problem of corruption is that when the public no longer trusts journalists. If the press cannot be trusted to regulate itself, then citizens become more likely to call on the government to help clean out the industry. If a government become the primary source of regulation of the press, there is a conflict of interest when it comes to reports on government activities.

PAST INTERNATIONAL ACTION

The United Nations has recognized the importance of a free press since its beginning. In 1993, it established May 3rd as World Press Freedom Day. May 3rd is the anniversary of the Windhoek Declaration, which was a statement of free press principles created by African newspaper journalists in 1991. The declaration was created at a United Nations Educational, Scientific and Cultural Organization (UNESCO) seminar in Windhoek, Namibia and is viewed as an important document that has influenced the creation of similar declarations around the world and focused international attention on the issue of press freedom.¹¹



ARTICLE 19 OF THE UNIVERSAL DECLARATION OF HUMAN RIGHTS

"Everyone has the right to freedom of opinion and expression; this right includes freedom to hold opinions without interference and to seek, receive, and impart information and ideas through any media regardless of frontiers"¹²

⁹ The Guardian. "Silvio Berlusconi convicted over publication of wiretapped conversations." (<https://www.theguardian.com/world/2013/mar/07/silvio-berlusconi-convicted-publication-conversations>)

¹⁰ Lupano, Emma. "Linfen 'gag fees' spark media ethics debate in China." China Media Project. (<http://cmp.hku.hk/2008/10/30/1322/>)

¹¹ "World Press Freedom Day: The Basics" ifex. (https://www.ifex.org/wpfd/wpfd_about/)

¹² "Universal Declaration of Human Rights." United Nations. (<http://www.un.org/en/universal-declaration-human-rights/>)



The Windhoek Declaration was followed by the Charter for a Free Press in 1992, that began with these words "A free press means a free people." It went on to outline the various ways that freedom of the press can be threatened or censored and what the writers saw as the obligation of nation states. This document was approved by journalists from around the world at a conference sponsored by the World Press Freedom Committee, the World Association of Newspapers, International Press Institute, Inter American Press Association, North American National Broadcasters Association and the International Federation of the Periodical Press. These non-governmental groups, with the full support of the U.N Secretary-General and UNESCO's Director General, are at the forefront of the fight for press freedom. Further action by the U.N is difficult due to the tremendous resistance of some countries to do more than pay lip service to press freedom, and the difficulty in determining if the press is truly independent or not.¹³

¹³ "Declaration of Windhoek." UNESCO.
(http://www.unesco.org/webworld/fed/temp/communication_democracy/windhoek.htm)